

REFLECTIONS ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
AND SOCIAL CHANGE

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR V.K.R.V. RAO

Problems of Primary Education in India

J.P. NAIK

*Problems of Primary Education in India**

J.P. NAIK

UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION: A NATIONAL GOAL

Among the Aryans who came to India, there was a tradition of giving a certain basic education to all boys and girls. Over the succeeding centuries, however, a hierarchical society developed in the country and this tradition got eclipsed. The situation deteriorated with the passage of time and, at the opening of the nineteenth century, the spread of formal education including a knowledge of the three Rs became restricted to a small minority. The surveys about the extent of the spread of primary education among the people conducted by the government in different parts of the country in the early half of the nineteenth century showed that the local communities generally organized schools on their own for the primary education of children; that such schools existed in almost all villages, the bigger villages and towns having several such institutions; that only a small proportion of children in the age-group 5-15 (between one and five per cent) attended schools; that such education was mostly availed of by boys; and that the percentage of literacy among adult males (inclusive of those who could only sign their names) was only about six. At that time, even the concept of universal education of all children was not socially accepted; and, in fact, the common belief was that primary education was meant only for the boys of the upper social castes or groups and that such education was unnecessary or even harmful for girls or for the children of the lower social groups and especially the untouchable castes.

In such a situation, the first obvious step was to educate public and

*The expression "primary education" is used here to denote education of children in the age-group of 6-14 or in grades I-VII or I-VIII, depending upon the pattern adopted in the State.

official opinion to accept universal primary education as a national goal. The lead in this was taken by the enlightened national leadership. Mahatma Jotiba Phule advocated the spread of education among all the people and especially among women and the untouchables (1851). Dadabhai Naoroji pleaded for the introduction of universal primary education before the First Indian Education Commission (1882). Gokhale first moved a resolution on the subject in the Central legislature (1910) and then introduced a Bill (1912) which was thrown out under pressure from the government. The Province of Bombay was the first to pass an Act on the subject, known popularly as the Vithalbhai Patel Act (1918); and during the next decade or so, almost all Provinces passed similar legislation. The concept of universal primary education became an integral part of the national system of education which began to be discussed in earnest since 1906; and eventually Mahatma Gandhi put forward his scheme of basic education which would provide seven years of education (age-group 7-14) to all children, an education which would be woven round socially useful productive work and whose content would be approximately equal to the matriculation *minus* English. All these non-official efforts exerted considerable pressure on government which tried to expand primary education as far as possible but refused to accept responsibility for providing universal education on administrative and financial grounds which, in its opinion, had decisive weight. But all such caution was set aside by the government of free India which included a special clause in the Constitution, adopted in 1950, to the effect that the state shall endeavour to provide, by 1960, free and compulsory education to all children till they complete the age of 14 years (Art. 45). The efforts of our national leaders spread over about one hundred years were thus crowned with success and universal primary education became a national goal three years after the attainment of independence.

PROGRESS OF PRIMARY EDUCATION (1947-78)

What attempts have we made to fulfil the directive of Art. 45 of the Constitution during the past three decades and how far have they succeeded in realizing this objective of national priority? The answers to these questions are not really satisfactory.

We began at a fairly low level of achievement in 1947. In spite of all the expansion of primary education achieved under the British rule

during more than one hundred and thirty years (1813-1947) the overall situation of primary education at the attainment of independence was still far from satisfactory. Thousands of villages were without schools; only one child out of three in the age-group 6-11 and only one child out of eleven in the age-group 11-14 were enrolled in schools; the rates of wastage and stagnation were very high; and the quality of primary education left a good deal to be desired. This low starting point only implied that a well-planned, intensive, and sustained effort was needed to achieve the goal of universal primary education by 1960. It is a pity that this effort was not made and that, in the development of education in the post-independence period, priority was accorded to secondary and higher education and not to primary education.

It is not that we have not done anything whatsoever. We did invest considerable resources in expanding the facilities for primary education. For instance, the number of primary schools has increased from 209,671 in 1950-51 to 477,037 in 1977-78 and that of middle schools from 13,596 to 97,021 during the same period. It may be said that a primary school (classes I-V) is now available within easy walking distance from the home of about 95% of the children and that a middle school (classes VI-VIII) is similarly accessible to about two-thirds of the children. It is therefore comparatively easy now to provide adequate access to all children to both primary and middle school education; and for all that one can see, this goal of creating universal provision of facilities may be reached by the end of the Sixth Plan.

Our attempts to secure universality of enrolment have not had an equal success. The total enrolments in primary education (classes I-V) have increased from 1.92 crores or 42.6% of the child population in the age-group 6-11 in 1950-51 to 7.02 crores or 82.8% of the child population in 1977-78; and those in middle school education have increased from 0.31 crores or 12.7% of the child population in the age-group 11-14 in 1950-51 to 1.78 crores or 37.9% of the child population in 1977-78. It has been estimated that, at present, about 80% of the children are enrolled in schools, generally between the ages of 5 and 8 and the 20% who never go to schools include mostly girls and children of the poorest and the lowest social groups. Let us not ignore the fact that this expansion of primary education is unprecedented in our own educational history and that it is better than the progress shown by many other developing nations in the

contemporary situation. All the same, this progress is far from adequate, especially in view of the growth of population; and if we go on at this rate, it may not be possible to enrol all children in primary schools even in a period of ten years, especially because the task of enrolling additional children becomes exponentially difficult beyond an enrolment of 85% or so.

But perhaps our failure is the greatest in reaching universality of retention or in ensuring that every child who is enrolled in schools is retained therein till he completes the primary course or reaches the age of 14. The rates of wastage were very high in 1947; and even now, they have been only marginally reduced: out of every one hundred children enrolled in class I, only about 50 reach class V and only about 25 reach class VIII. It is mainly because of this large wastage that primary education makes so small a contribution to literacy which has increased only from 14 to 35%; and unless effective steps are taken to reduce this wastage, we may not be able to fulfil the directive of Art. 45 of the Constitution before the end of the century.

Our attempts to improve the quality of primary education have probably been the least effective. We have had some success in raising the remuneration and professional competence of primary teachers, in improving curricula, text-books, and supervision, and in providing amenities such as free books and school lunches to a proportion of the children enrolled. But, by and large, the primary school of today is a very humble institution, often ill-equipped and ill-housed, largely unrelated to its local environment, and generally of such low standards that it fails to attract and retain a large proportion of children. The needed qualitative improvement of primary education is probably the greatest challenge of all and the most difficult problem to be solved to realize our national objective.

In the paragraphs that follow, it is proposed to discuss why we failed to solve these problems satisfactorily during the past 30 years and what measures we can take to solve them and to fulfil the Constitutional directive on primary education in the near future (i.e., in about ten years or so).

CREATION OF A STRONG SOCIAL DEMAND

One reason, and probably the overriding reason, which hampers the progress of primary education is the absence of a strong social demand for it among the people, especially among the poor people

and the weaker sections of the society. Being uneducated and illiterate, they do not see any advantage in being literate or attending school – an attitude which is strengthened by the general irrelevance of the school programme to its environment or to the future life of the children. In fact, many of them regard education as an undesirable activity which alienates children from the work and life to which they are destined without fitting them for an alternative and improved way of life. They are therefore uninterested in the local primary school and have little contact with it. They do not care whether or not the teacher attends the school and much less whether or not he teaches. They are not particular about sending their children to school and in fact may even object to the education of girls. But when they are too young to be of use (i.e., generally between the ages of 5 and 8), they do not object to the teacher taking them to school instead of playing in the streets: this is a mutually convenient arrangement that helps the teacher to hold on to his job and provides the parent with a free-of-charge baby-sitting institution. But as soon as the children grow up and begin to work or be useful, they withdraw them from the school. The teacher does not mind because he can easily replace them with other young children. But it is this withdrawal that is responsible for the frighteningly large rate of wastage which has shown but a very small decrease over the past thirty years. Similarly, these parents do not often provide the children with the needed books and other educational equipment (very often, they are too poor to do so), do not or cannot take any interest in their studies, and are also incapable of providing that encouragement and guidance which children badly need from their parents. Consequently, their children do not get the best out of the schools even for the short time that they are there: they learn little and, more often than not, forget what little they have learnt soon afterwards. If all these formidable hurdles in the progress of universal primary education are to be overcome, there is no alternative but to create a strong social demand for education among the large masses of people.

How is this demand to be generated? Perhaps the most potent tool is adult education including the liquidation of mass illiteracy. Even today, one finds that the education of the parents (especially of the mother) makes a tremendous difference to the future education of children. A literate parent generally sends his children to school, provides them with the needed books and equipment, takes interest in their studies, and retains them at school as long as possible. It would

therefore be quite correct to say that the education of the parent generates the strongest social demand for primary education and becomes the best insurance for the education of children. If this is true, it follows that we must organize the campaign for universal primary education side by side with equal or even stronger campaign for adult education. This was what the socialist countries did; and the results obtained have shown that they were also able to provide universal primary education to children side by side in a short time. Our great mistake in the past has been that we have ignored the programme of adult education altogether with disastrous consequences on the progress of primary education. Fortunately, the Sixth Five Year Plan provides, for the first time since independence, the needed financial resources for a major attack on the problem of adult illiteracy as well as for an intensive drive to spread the primary education. One hopes that this effort succeeds.

Another instrument, though not so powerful as the liquidation of adult illiteracy, is the education of the parent with regard to his responsibilities towards the child and in particular about his duty to give him at least the basic primary education which is needed in the modern world. This can be done through enrolment drives which should be organized annually for about three months in the beginning of the school year. Every official and non-official agency should be used in these drives to talk to parents, to hold a house-to-house census of all children of school age, to enrol non-attending children, and generally to create an atmosphere supportive to the spread of primary education. It is not that we have not organized these drives, but our efforts have been sporadic and discontinuous and have depended more on the interest of individual officers or ministers rather than form part of a national policy to be sustained in all parts of the country continuously for some years. By and large, we have made the primary teachers themselves responsible for enrolment without much outside assistance or supervision so that they have generally tended to do the least that is needed under the law and bogus enrolments have tended to predominate. A better planned and sustained system of annual enrolment drives using, not only the primary teachers, but also all other relevant agencies, both official and non-official, will go a long way in helping a quick spread of primary education. As resistance to education of girls is a definite component of the traditional culture of several social groups, a deliberate effort to overcome it and to impress the significance of the education of girls on the minds of such social

groups should be an important element of these campaigns for parental education.

A third and an even more important means of creating a genuine social demand for education among the poor and the deprived people is to tune primary education to their life and needs. Our inability to sell education to them is only partially due to their ignorance: it is even more due to the fact that this education is not really saleable. What we are trying to do is to spread our education, based essentially on western, middle-class, and urban concepts and values to a traditional, poor, and rural society. What we really need therefore is a transformation in the character of this education, its adjustment to local environment, and its attunement to the life of the people to be educated – to their needs and aspirations. This is a major academic challenge to which our educated community – itself alienated from the people – has paid no attention so far and it is to this challenge that we have now to address ourselves.

POVERTY

Another potent reason for the failure to spread primary education is poverty: most of the non-attending children and those who are dropped or pushed out mostly come from the poor people who live below the poverty line. Poverty has been a handicap for the spread of education, not only in India, but everywhere. If the removal of poverty were that simple, one should recommend it as the tool for the universalization of primary education. But the problem of poverty is far more intractable than that of ignorance. We must therefore evolve techniques whereby primary education can become universal in spite of poverty and, in fact, can even be used as an instrument to reduce poverty itself. In other words, the attacks on poverty and ignorance have to be made concurrently and the latter has to be used to strengthen the former. This problem has received little attention so far, mainly because our plans have not yet accorded that priority to the improvement of the standards of living of the poor and rural people which it deserves. It is high time that we accorded this priority and took the essential social and economic measures that would help the spread of education.

In addition, we must also give some thought to two major programmes. The first is to evolve techniques which will enable children from poor families to work *and* learn. In the present system,

it is very unfortunate that work and education are incompatible and inimical to each other: a child must either work or attend school (which generally insists on full-time attendance) – it cannot do both. Consequently, it is only the children of well-to-do parents (who can afford to feed, clothe, equip, and send their children to schools) that receive primary education which is denied to the child from poor families who must work in order to survive. A way out of this situation is to provide part-time education at convenient hours so that children can work and also learn. Our present rule is that children must attend either on a full-time basis or not at all. Instead, we should adopt a new policy which will say that every child must attend school from the age of six to the age of 14, on a full-time basis if (and when) possible and on a part-time basis if (and when) necessary. Of course, the adoption of this policy will have to be accompanied by making very large-scale arrangements for the conduct of part-time primary and middle schools to which all children who are required to work will have easy access. Needless to say, such a programme (which hardly exists at present) can prove to be the most effective check to prevent premature withdrawals or to bring down the existing high rates of wastage.

A question may be raised whether such part-time education would not be inferior or a poor substitute for full-time education. It need not be so. Work has to be an integral part of education and consequently, even children from well-to-do families must be required to spend adequate time in work-experience and engage themselves in socially useful productive work. On the other hand, these children who work and have that experience already need to concentrate on liberal education. The gap in the time spent in formal education by the two groups of children need not therefore be very wide; and if proper teaching methods are employed, it is possible to bring up the attainments of part-time students almost to the same level as rest of full-time students. This issue will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

The second programme to reduce the handicap of poverty is to provide free books and equipment, free clothes and free lunches to children who need them. These programmes have already been initiated; and steps must now be taken to provide the needed resources and to expand them to cover all needy children. Wherever possible and necessary, some individual attention and personal tuition should also be provided to children from unsatisfactory home backgrounds to enable them to catch up with other students.

NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

A large number of academic problems will have to be tackled in the process of universalizing primary education. These are extremely important and rank next only to the socio-economic issues raised above. Perhaps the most important of these is that of non-formal education.

The spread of primary education, especially to the poor, is adversely affected by our almost exclusive reliance on the formal education system which insists on a single-point entry (in class I at about the age of 5 or 6), sequential annual promotions, almost exclusive use of full-time professional teachers and absolute conformity with full-time attendance. All these rigid features have to go and we must create a new elastic educational structure with high emphasis on non-formal education if primary education is to be universalized in the near future. This will need the implementation of several major reforms.

(1) The insistence on the single-point entry in class I at about the age of 5 or 6 should go. A large proportion of children do not enter the school system in this way and there should be adequate provision for it through additional entry points. For instance, grown-up children in the age-group 9-11 or 11-14 (or even 14-17) who have not been to school at all and who desire to study should be free to join special part-time classes organized for them and complete the studies in classes I-V at their own pace. Similarly, those children who have completed class V (either on a full-time or on a part-time basis) should also be able to study in part-time special classes and complete the studies for classes VI-VIII at their own pace.

(2) The system of dividing the formal school into fixed grades (I to VIII) and to arrange annual promotions from one grade to the next has a certain utility and may continue where necessary. But it is not a very good system, from the academic point of view, even for full-time education. It is not at all suitable for part-time students who are keen to maximize their learning in the shortest time. The ungraded system should therefore be adopted even in the full-time formal schools. It is of course a must for all part-time classes of non-formal education.

(3) This system of annual promotions is based on the concept of keeping the time (i.e., one year) constant for all children to master a prescribed unit of studies. As abilities of children differ, their attainments during this constant period of one year vary considerably.

We accept these variations and grade students some of whom get a first class and others fail. But let us not forget that this is not the only basis for organizing primary education. We can also organize it on the basis that a minimum achievement is kept constant for all children and the time they take is allowed to vary. In this system, known as mastery learning, the entire course of primary education is divided into a few sequential units and every student is expected to master one unit before he passes on to the next. What then happens is that all students achieve a minimum standard, some in a short time and others in a longer one. The adoption of this method will obviously make primary education more effective and useful.

(4) As stated above, the present exclusive emphasis on full-time education has to go and programmes of part-time education have to be developed in a big way if children who are compelled to work on economic grounds are to receive education (and such children are about 50-70% of the total).

(5) Similarly, we have to give up our exclusive dependence on full-time professional teachers and learn to use all the teaching resources in the community in order to reduce costs and to increase effectiveness of instruction. The primary schools should therefore freely use local talented persons to teach even in the formal schools on a part-time basis (e.g., for subjects such as productive work or music). The use of such persons in non-formal programmes is an absolute necessity.

If these changes are made, we shall be creating another channel of education – the non-formal channel – which will be a viable alternative to the formal channel which alone exists at present. In this alternative channel of non-formal education, the classes should be small in size (15 to 20 students), should ensure that the number of working days is increased to about 300 a year by cutting down on holidays, should supply free books and equipment, and should use the ungraded system and mastery learning methods to ensure good progress on the part of each student. This will also reduce the academic gap between full-time and part-time education to a considerable extent.

The utilization of the existing system of primary education is mostly restricted to the children from well-to-do homes because of our almost exclusive dependence on formal education. The development of non-formal education, more than any other single factor, will help us to correct this imbalance and to extend primary education to all those poor and underprivileged groups which are now denied access to it.

OTHER ACADEMIC PROBLEMS

Improvement of standards and increasing the relevance of primary education is yet another major academic problem which has to be tackled on a priority basis. In this context also, several major reforms are called for.

(1) Curricula need revision. Emphasis has to be on the teaching of language and mathematics. Science with reference to local environment, counteracting superstitious beliefs and creating a rational outlook needs to be highlighted. Participation in socially useful productive work should be obligatory. There should be adequate emphasis on physical education, sports and games as well as on the fine arts and cultural activities. The existing curricula have only one overriding objective, viz., to prepare the student for admission to a secondary school. While this objective is valid, the other more important objectives are: to introduce the child to the best elements of human culture; to create a desire for learning and to enable him to learn further by himself; and to prepare him for his future work and life so that his education becomes relevant and useful even when he does not go to a secondary school. Adequate attention given to these objectives will greatly change the nature of the existing curricula and make them more meaningful and attractive to the vast bulk of the children who will not and cannot proceed to secondary education. They will not also create a problem for those children who do want to go to a secondary school because their needs can be easily taken care of either by some adjustment in the curricula for secondary schools or by providing suitable bridge courses.

(2) The text-books and other educational materials needed for primary schools will have to be greatly improved. In particular, there is a need for a variety of materials useful for different environments. The costs of these materials will have to be kept down and, as said earlier, they will have to be given free to all needy students.

(3) The methods of teaching and evaluation will have to be greatly altered. New and more dynamic methods of teaching which will de-emphasize rote-learning and encourage activities, independent thinking, planning and execution of projects, and problem-solving will have to be adopted.

(4) The quality of professional teachers will have to be improved and they should be enabled to teach side by side with selected members of the local community.

(5) Supervision of primary schools will have to be considerably improved, especially by bringing the schools closer to the local community and through the development of school complexes recommended by the Education Commission (1964-66).

(6) The problems of single-teacher schools which will continue to exist need greater attention. Their numbers should be reduced to the extent possible. But where they have to exist, they should be improved through suitable academic programmes and the participation of part-time and voluntary teachers from the local community.

(7) At present, very little attention is given to the development of extra-curricular activities and provision of suitable buildings and equipment. In fact, about 95% of the existing expenditure on primary education is spent only on teachers' salaries. In a good system, the expenditure on items other than teachers' salaries should be about 30%. This implies, not only an increase in total outlay, but also the development of such programmes as free supplies of books, provision of school lunches, better attention to buildings and equipment, and a more imaginative programme of curricular activities.

Let it not be forgotten that quality of primary education is closely related to its expansion. If the quality of education is not good, it will not sell and it will not be possible to universalize it. Even if one could do so, the spread of the education of poor quality will be undesirable and counter-productive. On the other hand, good quality primary education will be able to attract and hold students better and thereby assist materially in universalizing it. The significance of these academic problems (which have been largely neglected so far) cannot therefore be over-emphasized.

In connection with the improvement of standards in primary education, mention needs to be made of the concept of the common school system. At present, our educational system is really a dual system consisting of a small core of fee-charging private schools which maintain good standards (these are availed of by the powerful rich and well-to-do social groups) and a large periphery of free but substandard public schools (these only are available to the masses). This leads to a very undesirable segregation between the children of the haves and have-nots. What is worse, the powerful social groups lose all interest in the free government schools which are really meant for "other people's children". A major reform of primary education would therefore be to remove this dualism. All primary schools, whether public or private, should be made free and access to every

primary school should be open to all children who live in its neighbourhood, irrespective of social class or economic status. This concept of neighbourhood school advocated by the Education Commission (1964-66) will bring together the children of the haves and the have-nots together under a common school system and thereby help in creating a cohesive and egalitarian society. What is equally important, it will help to improve standards of primary education all round in a very short time.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL ISSUES

In universalizing primary education, several administrative and financial issues need close attention. The more important of these have been briefly noticed below.

(1) The administration of primary education should be as close to the people as possible. In other words, it is the local community that can best administer its primary schools. Steps would therefore have to be taken to associate the local community with the administration of primary education in an effective manner. This will bring the primary school and community together in a programme of mutual service and support.

(2) The provision of primary education is generally unequal between different communities and this trend becomes even stronger when local communities are allowed to administer primary education. What generally happens is that poorer local communities (which need better and more education) are generally unable to provide it and a wide gap develops between the extent and the quality of primary education in poor local communities and the rich ones. These inequalities affect all other levels of administration also and similar inequalities are found between districts, between towns and cities, between urban and rural areas, and also between the richer and more advanced States and the poorer and more backward areas. What is needed is a conscious and sustained effort to reduce such regional imbalances through an appropriate system of grants-in-aid from the districts to the local communities, from the States to the districts (or major towns and cities), and from the Centre to the States.

(3) There are also imbalances between different social groups just as they exist between different regions. It is therefore necessary to strive to reduce these also and make special efforts for the education of girls, scheduled castes and tribes, and other backward communities.

(4) There is considerable waste and ineffectiveness in the existing expenditure on primary education. This will have to be examined in depth and appropriate action taken by the Central and State governments.

(5) Every attempt should be made to encourage experimentation and innovations.

(6) The unit costs in primary education will have to be reduced so that it becomes financially feasible to provide universal education; and the total allocations to primary education will have to be substantially increased and saved from the temptation to divert them to other sectors.

(7) Better and prompt methods of monitoring progress of primary education will have to be devised.

TO SUM UP

The preceding discussion shows how complex the problem of universal primary education is and what supreme efforts are needed to provide it. The essential components of this effort are: a relentless determination of the nation to achieve this goal which provides a basis of equality; creation of a strong social demand; reduction of mass poverty; development of large-scale programmes of non-formal education; qualitative improvement; adoption of the common school system; reduction of imbalances of educational development between different social groups and regions; large-scale administrative decentralization; considerable increase in financial outlays as well as their more effective utilization; and an improved system of monitoring and control. While each one of these components has a place of its own, the most significant of them all is the first, viz., a relentless national commitment to provide universal primary education. This was seen at its best in the pre-independence national leadership. During the past thirty years one has seen the weakening and dilution of this commitment, in spite of all the brave words to the contrary, in the strengthening of the power-base of the upper and middle classes who have used the state to further their own ends and to perpetuate their own privileged position. The needed commitment therefore just does not exist and no one knows when the ruling classes of India will keep their sacred promise to the people and meet this essential basic need for universal primary education. This commitment may come either by a revitalization of the class leadership or through the

development of a new leadership from among the masses themselves, probably through the latter channel. And until this leadership develops, this major national programme will have to wait for fulfilment.